

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

# A Community College District Chancellor's View on Transformational Leadership

Francisco Rodriguez, PhD, Chancellor, Los Angeles Community College District

*Editor's Note: Francisco Rodríguez was recently appointed as chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District. Editors from the JTLPS interviewed Dr. Rodríguez on issues around leadership and transformative change in the twenty-first century. This is a themed transcript culled from an extensive interview with Chancellor Rodríguez.*

## Chancellor Rodríguez on his Vision for the Los Angeles Community College District

*JTLPS:* What is your vision for the district and how will you know when you have actualized it?

*Rodríguez:* My vision is in time to be leading the highest performing community college district, and I recognize it is going to take some time and effort to get there. Let's do an interview a year from now, and you can ask, "You said this a year ago, now what have you found?" or "You aspired to do these things, now what have you found to be the case?" And what is the state of the urban community college district? You have to be humble in this role and not be over-confident. Whether you are leading a smaller college, as I did at one time at Woodland Community College with 3,000 students, or the largest community college district, your style and approach has to have *corazón* (heart) driven by a sense of true authenticity. In

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two weeks, I am going to an event sponsored by the college foundation at Los Angeles Southwest College where the community is raising money for student scholarships and recognizing the 100th anniversary of the LA Chapter of the NAACP, the longest serving civil rights organization in the country. Our work as educators is not only about structure and vision of an organization, but it is also about emotion, conviction and *coraje* (courage) – that is, to understand that inequities still exist and that it is our job, as many did before us, to redress them.

Allow me to share a bit more about the vision that I have:

1. I would say I have an initial vision for when I get there to assess and strengthen the capacity of the organization, to support those who have invested their entire careers there, and to listen in an authentic and meaningful way. However, I do suspect that that vision will be enhanced, augmented and perhaps even reshaped because as a new member, I do not want to appear nor do I pretend to have all of the answers – I don't, but I have ideas. My vision includes raising the level of educational attainment by looking at rates of student success, particularly completers and the experiences that made them successful. How will we know if our students are achieving at the rate of the best community colleges in the nation? In part, we will know by looking at the metrics of student success at various junctures.
2. To have a faculty, staff, and administration that is representative of the diversity of the entire metropolitan region – at every level and not just representation at the custodial, food services, and clerical levels. We need to look at the presidents, vice presidents, deans

and senior professors at each of the nine campuses that make up the district. And if it's not there and there is a disparity, we need to peel back and push for an answer as to why, why aren't we attracting, hiring, retaining, and promoting candidates? And that could be a measure as to where you begin, and in turn, signal where you want to head.

3. We need to have an ethos that values inclusiveness, diversity and equity in a way that shapes and forms the campus climate and culture of the colleges and district. This is the qualitative piece. A lot of work has been done on "climate" and the chilly environment for women and people of color. It is important to assess campus climate and to ask such questions as, "Do you feel affirmed and respected here? Are there opportunities for advancement and promotion? If not, what are we missing?" It is important to assess the capacity. There are a lot of strengths in the district and I am inspired by the people who are there, by the sense of community, and by the identity and sense of place that exists. It's inspirational.
4. Where are the resources going and what are we investing in? Out of a \$1.1 billion operational annual budget at LACCD, let's say 80% plus is going to human resources fixed costs. So the question is how are we distributing these resources that allows for the growth and development of our most important assets – our people and students? We need to look at the attrition rates, at what actuarial studies say about retirees and leadership succession patterns. LACCD, with over 10,000 employees, could grow their own leadership academy and I am interested in exploring that. To have people vested to live in South Los Angeles and to be proud of being from Watts, East Los Angeles and West LA, and to have our colleges in the heart of those communities is very powerful. Our colleges are beacons of opportunity and centers of our community. So they are not just campus buildings, they are testaments to the future of what a person can be and can become.

### **Chancellor Rodríguez on his Role as Leader of the Largest Community College District in the US**

*JTLPS:* As the leader of the largest community college district in the United States, how can you facilitate institutional change beyond consensus and the status quo and

encourage and support people to provide access beyond current expectations?

*Rodríguez:* Great question! Frankly, I am inspired by this challenge and I am terrified! This is the question of the 21st century as it relates to leadership. Let me answer it in the following way.

To promote institutional change you need the "Three C's" of Courage, Conviction, and *Coraje* (valor and boldness). This refers to the courage to lead and to facilitate conversations and speak out for social justice and equity and get people to follow their convictions and to redress the disparities. This is important because leadership is not done by an individual but by a movement of change agents and by those committed to morally just causes. Change requires persistence and you have to stick to it for the long haul. Best practices may not work right away and it may take a long time to germinate into systems that allow for change and improvement to occur. *Coraje* is tied to the notion that things aren't right and maintaining a sense of urgency. It's simply not right that there are a disproportionate number of people who are poor, in prison, and are the lowest-performing in our schools. To state it differently, it's unacceptable! You have to work with others who believe that, too.

Currently, if you look at the LACCD student profile, more than 70% of entering students need basic skills remediation. If you then disaggregate the data by gender, ethnicity, neighborhoods, socioeconomic status and zip code, this disparity and inequity exacerbates. More than 50% of the more than over 150,000 students served by the district are poor and 85% of them come from traditionally underserved and underrepresented communities.

To be a leader in such a diverse district is very attractive for me, as I am committed to the common and public good as an educator. I respect the tremendous challenge that lies ahead, but I am not daunted or dissuaded by it. It reminds me a bit of 9/11 when the brave firefighters were running into the burning buildings. We need people running in as educators to these districts that could stand to be improved, not out of them. I look forward to being engaged in dialogue with the district, the nine college presidents, the faculty and staff, and the governing board to foster a common vision and expectations for student access and success. And I am proud to be a part of that.

### Chancellor Rodríguez on Success and Faculty

*JTLPS:* You mentioned urban community college districts in the nation could be doing better. Talk about how your leadership is going to take your district to a whole other level. How is your leadership an exemplary model for other districts to follow? What is going to get you there?

*Rodríguez:* I have long held that the best and most effective student retention and success strategy is to hire, train, and support excellent faculty. Persistence and success are fueled by great teaching and learning environ-

*So we need to ask, why? Sometimes, we – consciously or unconsciously – look for a replication of models we are comfortable with, a profile or portrait that we recognize, instead of one that might be more inspirational and tenacious, perhaps even non-traditional. Excellence comes in many forms. We need to look not at who the person is today but who they can become with the support of the institution!*

ments...punto! (period!) It doesn't matter what structure or system is in place if you don't have exemplary instruction going on. So, if we are not shaping, reshaping, and reimagining our teacher preparation programs and doctoral education programs, our leadership efforts for the 21st century in the United States will fail and fall way short of bridging the educational outcomes between high and low-performing students.

One of the most enjoyable things I have been able to do over the last 11-15 years is to recommend outstanding faculty to the board to hire. That process to attract, recruit, hire and then once those faculty are here to ensure they are nurtured and supported, and not just stay as they are today, is one of the most important activities of a senior leader. My role is to provide the space for faculty to grow, and to challenge and support them. Again, it is not who the faculty member is today, but who the faculty member can become with the support and encouragement of the institution.

If we don't hire teachers that understand the needs of our students we are serving, we are replicating sameness and actually exacerbating disadvantage. With the high number of faculty projected to retire soon, there will

be multiple job openings to fill. However, we cannot just expect the good ones to show up. You have to be intentional about it and say, "This is the profile and characteristics of the instructor we are looking for that would serve this district well." At the screening and interview table, you sometimes hear, "Oh, we just don't have a diversified pool of faculty for a particular position." But I believe the strong pool of candidates is out there; some are just not advanced to the next level and they are not always selected. So we need to ask, why? Sometimes, we – consciously or unconsciously – look for a replication of models we are comfortable with, a profile or portrait that we recognize, instead of one that might be more inspirational and tenacious, perhaps even non-traditional. Excellence comes in many forms. We need to look not at who the person is today but who they can become with the support of the institution!

### Chancellor Rodríguez on Supportive Leadership

*Rodríguez:* Leadership is more than just being able to run a program or provide a service. It is my belief that the mark of an excellent leader is when you depart an organization, things continue to function well and continue to build on the foundation that you and others have helped to construct. Remember, leadership is not driven by an individual; it is a team effort. You may have charismatic, iconic leaders like César Chavez or Martin Luther King, but their true impact and legacy continues because the social or political movement embraced by the community is larger than any one individual.

LA has very distinct areas and neighborhoods, and an ethnic ethos that is palpable and powerful. So when speaking to the leaders of the various communities that make up the rich diversity of Los Angeles, I am going to need to understand the historical tenets of those communities and understand their leadership experiences with government, school systems, and society, in general.

### Chancellor Rodríguez on Transformative Leadership

*Rodríguez:* I read once that to be a transformational leader you have to have both the skills of an analyst and those of a social architect. I believe this to be true and that the best leaders can do this while being activist-educators.

Come June 1, when I assume my new responsibilities, it will be the first time in my close to 30 years in California higher education that I will not be on a college or universi-

ty campus. I will now be located at a downtown district office and those who know me know I dig hanging out with students, so this is different for me. While I don't know how that is going to be just yet, I do know that the success of any leader is with and through others. So part of my job will be to understand the heart and motivation of the college presidents of the nine institutions, so that I can support them and support the governing board in their fiduciary responsibilities as elected officials. My job is to empower and nurture, to remove obstacles and barriers, and to provide the resources that can help their respective campuses be successful. I believe you lead people and manage things. It is not the other way around. You need to lead people through inspiration, example and provide them with support.

### **Chancellor Rodríguez on Resistance and Challenges**

*Rodríguez:* The notion of being personally centered is important in leadership. You have to know what your own moral compass is and understand what guides you. In addition to strategic plan or fiscal plan, I believe you have to have an emotional plan, too, to stay grounded during times of resistance, because this is tough work. This is where ethics, courage, and finesse come into play. Resistance is always there. If you are personally centered you can deal with the personal attacks that may come with organizational change and leadership. Just remember that as long as your family loves and respects you, you are okay.

I have to manage my own expectations because I want change to occur and to occur now. I have a sense of urgency about these issues. Ideas and effective practice need time to germinate and become sustainable over time. Sometimes it's difficult to know if your leadership, practices and policies are working and getting traction. That's why the quantitative side is so important because you have to have some way of critically measuring progress at key junctures. You need metrics or performance standards. It is important to ask: Are the current policies in place actually and inadvertently producing dysfunction and disadvantage? A colleague of mine once shared that there is a difference between being happy and being successful and they are not always the same. You could be wholly successful, but if you are not happy, then it is not worth doing it.

### **Chancellor Rodríguez on the Intersegmentality of K-16 as a Continuum**

*Rodríguez:* With over 40 cities that we serve in the region, there are multiple school districts that feed into the Los Angeles Community College District. Those students who are in kindergarten today are future community college, California State University, University of California students. So we have to look at this educational continuum through an intersegmental lens. There is promise around the new K-12 curricular standards of common core. Although this is not my area of expertise, I will be knowledgeable about what K-12 teachers are doing in their classrooms so that I can better understand the connections to our sector.

What is invigorating to me about my role as Chancellor is that it interfaces with the City of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and the County of Los Angeles, amongst others. The region includes the University of California, several Cal State Universities, private universities, and multiple other political and social agencies. We all aim to support, empower, and assist people through education, public services and policy. As Chancellor, I am honored to be a part of this circle of education and public service.

I want the community to know that they have another person on their team who is invested in the urban core and success of Los Angeles. If people leave away from the urban core, I don't think it is good for the health and vitality, and the democratization of this country. So being a part of a major urban center and ensuring its success is critically important from many vantage points.

*JTLPS:* So, how are you connected as Chancellor to the K-12 system? How do you get the K-12 folks to see higher education in the same light?

*Rodríguez:* First and foremost, I am an educator, so hopefully that will provide some credibility with my K-12 colleagues. Everywhere I have been I make it my business to get to know the superintendents of the feeder school districts intimately. I become interested in the success of their schools, learn what their challenges are, and find opportunities to work collaboratively to resolve them. Through faculty and administrative collaboration, I'll seek structural opportunities to better understand and collaborate around curriculum, particularly in English, math and reading courses, because these are the "gateway" disciplines for students.

I expect functional partnerships to occur and a positive relationship to emerge in Los Angeles. The LA school district is so large they have regional superintendents. I have already met the superintendent from East Los Angeles at an event I attended recently and we had an immediate connection of common purpose. We did not need a formal introduction. As veteran educators, there were things that we knew that were unspoken. I was essentially told, "Welcome, brother, to the region and let's get started." I will connect with the other educators as well.

*JTLPS:* We know the University of California President Janet Napolitano has just created what they are calling a position that talks to a K-16 philosophy. It is about educating the individual because what happens in one sector impacts the other. We all have articulation agreements. We have our structures, our own curriculum, our own policies and they are very different across the system and it's a disservice to our students not to articulate across the K-16 spectrum. How do we bridge the gap all along the K-16 continuum?

*Rodríguez:* I couldn't agree with you more for the need for this. We need to have a mindset of intersegmentality and not just cooperation. We need a seamless, well-designed and articulated transition between K-12 and higher education.

But this is easier said than done. How do we institutionalize, in the best sense, and embed cooperation? What are the evaluation systems of both K-12 and colleges or universities that can help to incentivize this cooperative behavior? Currently, there is no systemic way to cross-pollinate between our systems. If it occurs, it occurs happenstance. We seem to be entrenched in parochial behavior to focus in our areas only and there seems to be no real way to shape the standards in play, only to comply. The systems we currently have seem to be an archaic structure, not one positioned for the twenty-first century, so something needs to change.

*JTLPS:* So how do you get administrators to convince our K-16 faculties to treat those gateway courses as promises and not as gatekeepers? How do you change the current paradigm so that the so called "gate keeping courses" become gateway courses? Ultimately what we are talking about is access. How do we foster and promote access?

*Rodríguez:* It is access, but it is also about success. In the 1960s, the California Master Plan for Higher Education was designed as a blueprint for every Californian to

be able to receive an affordable, high-quality education. It was a beautifully-imagined, three-tiered system of higher education that was the envy of the country. Back then, every Californian, irrespective of where they were located, would have access to a high quality public education. And at that time, the State of California funded seventy to eighty percent of the entire system. Now the University of California is funded by the State of California to the tune of about eight to ten percent. The funding for the Cal State Universities is more than that, but far less than what the system needs. The community colleges are also dependent on state funding, as is K-12. So while we have to be vigilant that public colleges and universities are reflective of the demography of California, the focus of education today is on success and completion rates.

It is important for K-12 to understand that their job is not done when their students graduate from the district in the same way that our responsibility does not begin when those students arrive at the community college or university. The fact is that many students won't leave their native areas to obtain a higher education. Seventy-five percent of African American and Latino students stay local and go to community colleges across the nation, so we have to work together to craft that collective vision between K-12 and higher education to provide access and success.

*JTLPS:* So what could educational leaders do to support this?

*Rodríguez:* Most of this can be done by providing incentives and redesigning and reimagining what merit is. Here in California at the university level, research, teaching and public service serve as the three pillars or columns for faculty merit. But these are not weighted equally and as a result faculty of color or progressive faculty who engage in a high amount of public service can be disadvantaged in the tenure and merit process because they don't divorce their craft from their work with the community. What is your merit incentive at the University of California or at the CSU? Teaching and public service is the least of its focus. Both the UC and CSU privilege research over teaching and public service and balancing them out would be better.

Administrators can recast and redesign the value system so that merit has a broader and more holistic view. It's not only about how many articles you published or how many books you have written. That's clearly important, too. But in addition to that, we need to look at the other



qualitative features that suggest who you are as a teacher, an academic scholar, and a practitioner. I can recall in my undergraduate years and at the University of California, we had exceptional faculty, academic leaders and activists, but when they got to the cusp of tenure they were gone. The merit system was not conducive to moving them forward. They were not advanced by their peers who were only interested in particular characteristics and narrowly-defined academic portfolios. And those were the people who were mentors and advisors to folks like us and that spoke out about social justice, sexism, homophobia and racism. Yet for some reason as brilliant as they were in the classroom, they weren't advanced to tenure. So part of addressing this dilemma is how you define and reward meritocracy into the system that is broader and more inclusive of teaching effectiveness and public service.

*JTLPS:* In a year we will ask you this same question: There is disproportionality in outcomes between the nine

It's not only about how many articles you published or how many books you have written. That is important too. But in addition to that, we need to look at the other qualitative features that suggest who you are as a teacher, an academic scholar and a practitioner. I can recall in my undergraduate years and at the University of California. We had exceptional faculty, academic leaders and activists, but when they got to the cusp of tenure they were gone.

community college campuses in your district. While there may be access, the outcomes as measured by transfer rates between groups are disproportional for certain ethnic groups. How will you grapple with this to provide a more meritocratic system that serves all students?

*Rodríguez:* I have been giving this vexing issue some thought and I suspect I will continue to do so throughout my tenure. I was talking to my son, Andres, recently about the achievement gap and he said, "Dad, it's not about achievement, it is about opportunity, because not everybody starts at the same place. So how can you expect the same outcomes to occur?" This is a wise observation from a young scholar. He's right – all people do not start at the same place. And what are the metrics you use to measure this? There is a disproportionate impact on those that are

poor, those that are first-generation, and those that are known as linguistic minorities. That's why data are important here. We need to disaggregate the student success data by looking at the zip code, gender, income and other demographic factors. We need to see where the real educational disparities are and you will see that the resources, or lack thereof, usually follow disproportionate engagement and outcomes.

Resources are not only money; it's about people, functional connections, and common purpose. One great resource is the CSU. The CSU is the largest provider of educational practitioners in the country and certainly in the state to urban schools. Intersegmental cooperation works best when faculty is talking and working with one another. Administrators can set the tone and structure the conversation, provide resources, and allow for professional development. Ultimately, however, it is going to be our faculty that produces the results. We need to incentivize good faculty behaviors around a common purpose and goal to raise student achievement and improve student outcomes.

### About the Author

*DR. FRANCISCO RODRÍGUEZ is the newly appointed Chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District. He previously served as the superintendent/president of the MiraCosta Community College District in North San Diego County and president of Cosumnes River College in Sacramento. He is a first-generation college graduate.*

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